

ZYGOTE

The world is full of rip-off merchants, from data thieves and opportunistic institutions to plagiarising students, but at least you can trust Zygote to tell it like it is in his own words

CREDIT SQUEEZE

Millions of personal data files have been lost in recent months, entirely due to poor security protocols in government departments. But the government has failed to take the single action that would prevent identity thieves benefiting as a result of their cock-ups.

Everyone recognises that one of the greatest dangers of identity theft is when crooks borrow money in other people's names and then disappear with it. Playing on this fear, most credit reference agencies now offer to monitor your personal file for a fee, and a number of banks provide a monitoring service as part of an incentive bundle or for an extra charge.

But why should we have to pay financial institutions to check the validity of loan requests? Isn't that their primary job? Legislation should have been passed to require banks and credit reference agencies to inform anyone as soon as a credit application is made in their name, at no charge whatsoever. This would protect the individual and the banks alike, and help trap bogus borrowers attempting to exploit government incompetence.

HOLY COW

The *Independent on Sunday* is usually a very sober publication, so Zygote was startled to read a ludicrous story in its pages claiming that UK prisoners are to receive surgically implanted tracking chips

to keep order in prison and enforce curfews. The paper gibbered that "tags, injected into the back of the arm with a hypodermic needle, consist of a toughened glass capsule holding a computer chip, a copper antenna and a capacitor that transmits data to a communications device for satellite tracking". We are warned that UK prisoners will be treated like cattle, but a few scientific facts knock this hysterical fiction on the head. Satellite tracking involves the tag being kept near a communications device with built-in GPS, and while cows haven't yet worked out how to fool the system, humans have.

Implant chips are cheap and easy to copy, and the copy can be stuck to the tracking device to 'prove' that the prisoner is where they are supposed to be. As for the original chip, this can be masked by tin foil or fried by a magnetic pulse, or the more adventurous felon may wish to dig it out with a razor blade and a paper clip.

The other glaring flaw in this scare story is that GPS is notoriously unreliable in tower blocks, concrete buildings and thick-walled structures such as, um, prisons. Perhaps the *Independent on Sunday* knows of a secret plan to re-house prisoners in straw huts and cattle sheds to get round this.

SLIPPING STANDARDS

The British Standards Institution is gearing up for yet another set of

kite-mark badges. With hilarious timing, the BSI has developed an official standard for data protection compliance. UK organisations will soon be able to apply for a badge of recognition to demonstrate how good they are at complying with the Data Protection Act, but Zygote wonders if you have spotted the flaw in this system? That's right folks, good practice in data protection is only good until it fails, and any assessment of corporate data security can only reflect a frozen moment in the past and an extrapolation of that moment into the future.

Gordon Wanless, chairman of the BSI forum, is seeking input from those with a significant interest in his new badge. Zygote is significantly interested enough to suggest that the badge should depict someone bolting the door of an empty stable.

SEEING RED

It's no surprise to learn that the FBI uses the very latest computer wizardry to monitor the phone calls, emails and text messages of suspected criminals. Their armoury of comms surveillance includes wiretaps, code-cracker routines and keyword-recognition software. But it is something of a surprise to learn that the FBI is supposed to pay the telephone company every time it uses their wires and cables.

An audit by inspectors at the US Justice Department has

revealed that a large number of cases have collapsed, not because the spooks failed to do their jobs properly but because their accountants failed to pay the phone bills on time. In a significant number of cases, all the evidence was lost after telecoms suppliers got so fed up sending red reminder notices that they cut the lines dedicated to delivering surveillance results to federal agents.

It has now been confirmed that over half the phone bills for electronic surveillance in FBI field offices have not been paid on time, and several aborted cases have involved suspected terrorists. This gives a whole new meaning to the expression the old bill.

SPREAD CHEATS

For years, university students have been trawling the web to find other people's academic work and pass it off as their own. The problem is so widespread that most UK universities subscribe to cheat-detection software that compares students' work against the huge catalogue of existing online files.

Now the problem has trickled down through sixth-form colleges and into schools. The Association of Teachers and Lecturers reports that over half of all course-work handed in by sixth-formers contains chunks of text blatantly cut and pasted from websites. Some scripts still contain wiki tags, hot links and even adverts.

This is quite shocking, and Zygote hopes such laziness and cheating will never infect the honourable profession of journalism. There is an excellent anti-plagiarism package called Turnitin, which Zygote recommends all magazine editors to use [diff/hist] before publishing any item [edit] [Click Here To Claim Your Prize MP3-Player] [link] in computer magazines [endedit] [© Rentagob 2006]... oops. ☹

Great Moments in Computing
© 1988-2008 Mel Croucher and Robin Greaville-Evans
243: GRAPHIC ICONS



Graphic icons were first codified by the Sumerians as long ago as 3100BC, in the land now called Iraq.



By the mid-16th century, graphic icons had developed into a system of highly ornate communication protocols.



And by the early 21st century, icons had replaced verbal communication altogether.